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Four-to-the-floor: The techno discourse and aesthetic work in Berghain in Berlin

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Abstract

In public and popular discourse Berlin is often ascribed a particular atmosphere, sometimes depicted in the idea of “Berliner Luft.” At the same time, Berlin and people living and working as well as visiting Berlin are still aware of the city’s recent history. This history is embodied in the city’s architecture as well as in the discourse about the need to remove “the wall in people’s heads.” This article is based on a study that has been conducted at the techno club Berghain, which has become a symbol for ‘the Berlin spirit,’ being embedded in the social and historical tradition of the formerly divided and radical Berlin that is celebrated in popular media. The club stands in a historic tradition of techno music in Berlin that once helped the process of joining two parts of the divided city together, and that today, 25 years after the fall of the wall, is a reference for a wave of publications on the techno scene. The article examines how this discourse is kept alive by aesthetic practices of interaction in contemporary Berlin techno clubs, which are jointly performed through the intertwining of architecture, DJing, dance, and music. This aesthetic work creates an experience that exists in disembodied form and instantiates “Berliner Luft,” keeping the discourse going, in the media and in the clubs.

Keywords: atmosphere, Berlin, dance, discourse, Germany, techno music

Techno music in Berlin

“[Berlin] was politically aligned with the left; it had a very militant character, which expressed itself in a very aggressive, minimalist raw form of techno... It’s a fuck-off to the rigid capitalist version of time it’s the experience that matters.” (Rogers, 2014, *Rolling Stone*)

The most important event in recent German history was the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 that has seen its 25th anniversary recently. Across Germany, the process of unification required an

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alignment of economic and political processes as well as removal of what was called in public discourse, “the wall in people’s heads” (“Die Mauer in den Köpfen”). In the course of the process of change and adaptation, a large number of people have moved mainly from the former East Germany to the more affluent and promising looking West. Throughout the transformation of Germany since 1990, Berlin has managed to keep its distinctiveness and to turn what since the 1920s was called “Berliner Luft” after Paul Lincke’s well-known march, into the Berlin that in the international media discourse today is heralded for its spirit of freedom, its creative atmosphere and behaviors associated with low costs of living that stand in a tradition of the divided Berlin (a collection of respective articles can even be found in a Facebook group “Could the New York Times please end its love affair with Berlin?”).

From the start, the arts and culture played an important part in the unification process, in particular in Berlin where in 1995 Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrapped the Reichstag with a silvery fabric; a work of art they described as expressing freedom. At the same time, supported by the availability of disused factory buildings, railway stations and warehouses music venues opened all over Berlin and the city became one of the centers of the “techno scene.”

One example of such a venue that has become paradigmatic for the Berlin spirit is the techno club Berghain. The club has been labelled “the best techno club in the world” by many voices ranging from the *New York Times* to *DJ Mag*. Its particular embeddedness in the social and historical tradition of the formerly divided and radical Berlin is celebrated in popular media, for example *The New Yorker* and the *Rolling Stone* that also mention Tresor and Watergate as the main techno temples. International journalists like Nick Paumgarten from *The New Yorker* find that Berghain “is notorious for its countless stories of drugs, X-rated sexual encounters and mind-blowing industrial techno,” positing that Berghain at night “transforms into a mecca for ravers, the holy grail of electronic beats, the motherland of unconformity and a haven where outlandish sexual fantasies come true” as Julia D’Orazio writes in an online travel site. The repetitive four-to-the-floor beat with bass drums on every beat as well as the social interaction is generating this experience, not in the mind but rather directly through the feet, creating an embodied understanding and, in the words of *The New Yorker*, an “experience that matters.”

Techno clubs such as Berghain in particular stand in a direct relationship to Berlin’s tradition. Techno has found a special home in Berlin as the techno movement emerged with the fall of the wall, when empty spaces in the former death strip were used for illegal parties driven by people’s euphoria. Not official speeches and political initiatives, rather techno music and the rave is said to have united the divided nation as the “sound of the family” when people from the East and West were dancing together without valuing each other’s appearance, background and socialization. Several books have been published in the last few years pertaining to the Berlin techno scene that is currently doing a lot of work on writing, documenting and stabilizing its history. Among the authors are contemporary music journalists such as Felix Denk, Sven von Thülen, and Jürgen Teipel. Some of these works, such as the biography of Berghain’s famous chief bouncer Marquardt, and older literature such as Isherwood’s novels on the historical roots of the Berlin spirit form part of today’s storytelling and discourse.

We suggest that this discourse is kept alive by aesthetic practices of interaction in contemporary Berlin techno clubs, particularly Berghain, which are jointly performed practices, albeit controlled and regulated, challenged and altered. We show that power and control is exerted on the level of aesthetic experience, through sound, architecture, dance and behaviours of inclusion and exclusion. These aesthetic practices are controlled and regulated by social agents in the techno club in visible and invisible ways, whereby the Berlin people and the increasingly international party crowd perform, sometimes challenge and resist these powers.

Discourse and aesthetic work

In this paper we focus on the level of the lived experience and the sensual, aesthetic experience when discussing forces of power that influence people and their understanding. We use Gernot Böhme's approach to aesthetics not as a category for judgment on art, but as a real social power, that also operates in organisational contexts such as a techno club.

Our perspective goes beyond people's joint presence in a space to include indeterminate 'atmospheres', which Böhme describes as "experienced in bodily presence in relation to persons and things or in spaces." This approach relates to Halbwachs' ideas on collective memory in spaces that revolve around not the space itself but around a shared alignment of people's feelings and thoughts in the space. Assmann breaks up the notion of collective memory into communicative memory that lives in everyday interaction and communication, and cultural memory that exists in disembodied form and requires institutions of re-embodiment such as monuments and spaces, and also uses dances and performances as a medium. Creating links to the past be seen as something that is not achieved by the space alone as a re-location (*Ver-Ortung*), but by people's 'aesthetic work' framed by the space, consisting of informal exchanges and more structured ways of interacting through, for example dance and music.

The consideration of dance, human movement and sound is of importance because human movement is an original medium that involves body-based, aesthetic forms of knowing. The idea that the social understandings are made alive through movement resonates in dance studies: Dance is a corporeal experience that is non-discursive but nevertheless existent as an important medium of social and cultural practice that addresses and creates collective, cultural memory. A focus away from the stable and visual aspects and towards movement with its embodied and fugitive nature, that is emphasized by dance scholars such as Susan Leigh Foster, acknowledges a more dynamic, complex and indeterminate nature of discursive and non-discursive practices within social spaces.

Data and Methods

The article examines the relationship between the discourse about techno music as "the sound of the family" that has brought Germans from East and West together and the "aesthetic work" that is required to keep the discourse going, not only in the media but also in the clubs and on the dance floor. Theoretically, it draws on dance and performance research to discuss elements such as the architectural space that frames the dance experience, the sound and the dance itself to examine the aesthetic aspects of the techno discourse and its sensual practice. We analyse data that include field notes gathered from participant observation at Berghain, interviews with resident and guest DJs and ravers gathered in the context of a different study by Brigitte Biehl-Missal, and an examination of popular literature relating to the specific case of Berghain and Berlin as well as related historical writings. We also consider elements of the public discourse such as media sources, blogs and social network sites, visual material and audio material – in our case are live recordings that for some nights and DJ sets are available on Soundcloud posted by the individual artist.

The contribution of the article to discourse studies therefore is an expansion of the notion of "discourse" to include not only "language" and "communication" in the analysis but also the material and bodily action of those interacting with each other inside Berghain. Thus, the article adds to current debates about multimodality in discourse analysis by using observations of people's behavior at and inside the venue, interviews and public discourse in traditional media and social media.

In the following, we will begin with the analysis of the architecture and space in which the dancing takes place. Then, second, we will examine the sound and music played in the

space. Third and last, we will use the analysis of the spatial and auditory environment as background for the investigation of the ‘aesthetic work’ that both DJs and dancers undertake.

Crossing the Limen: Inside Berghain

The techno club is based in a massive neo-classical heating power plant from the 1950s, situated between the East (the Friedrichshain quarter) and the West (Kreuzberg), and therefore named Berghain (figure 1). Architecture forms part of the public discourse through its representative and impressive function and also exerts control on the aesthetic level, being an obvious starting point for our discussion. Similar to entrances into many places of social relevance, Berghain is marked by a crossing of the ‘limen’ that separates the pre-liminal from the liminal betwixt-and-between phase. Entering Berghain is not without obstacles. Many people are rejected from entering the club, even after having waited for hours in the queue in front of building.

Public media refer to the unpredictable door policy in terms of control and mystification. Popular writers discern in the policy a democratic idea that chimes with the Berlin spirit by not respecting any celebrities but turning them away. Those, in turn, sometimes rant on Twitter accusing the clubs of discriminating against them. Writers like Julia D’Orazio refer to the worried atmosphere and the feelings when being rejected that only fuel the longing to try again with even more relief when successful: “Finally making it to the start of the line, I had the honour (or should I say displeasure) of Marquardt [the chief bouncer] giving me a millisecond of a glance and giving me a quick ‘nein’. Tonight wasn’t the night to grace Berghain with my presence, or perhaps it didn’t want a piece of me at all, ever.” Many people are excluded, and those admitted are required to observe style codes that often include dark casual clothes, boots and, in some cases, leather fetish outfits.



figure 1: Berghain in Berlin (Saturday night) (photo: BBM)



figure 2: Berghain in Berlin (Sunday morning) (photo: BBM)

The internal room structure, with some small and intimate spaces and other big and massive spaces, has been described by architects as “Ermöglichungsarchitektur” (“architecture of enabling”), emphasising that space does not only exert control but also provides opportunity. Entering the 18-meter-high turbine hall with its raw industrial style, that has been heralded by DJ Mag as the “most pure, epic and stripped-back rave environment you ever will encounter,” ravers ascend the stairs to the massive dance floor in the Berghain club, from which another staircase leads up to Panoramabar. As when the structure of people’s movement in places, guided by their architecture, has been said to produce a certain kind of cultivated citizen in museums, so the techno temple through its dark rooms and unisex toilets that are entered by groups of people – to consumer substances or for doing other things collectively – without any security observation enables and recreates a less restricted, tolerant behaviour that stands in a tradition of Berlin.

These motives stand in the traditions of a city with a history of post-world war depression, poverty and inflation. They evoke Berlin’s intriguing 1930s subculture, portrayed by Christopher Isherwood as having the atmosphere of a bohemian city in a world on the very brink of ruin; its shabby, dirty and run-down flats, with their crowded tenants, frame continuous consumption practices involving alcohol, sex and the search for fulfilment – the sort of spaces that seem to be invoked nowadays by Berlin’s techno party locations that differ from the sleek clubs in other parts of the world. Historically, there is reference to a more general theme of the “Berliner Luft” that has been described by novelists such as Conrad Alberti and Theodor Fontane and that works, as Craig writes, on people like alcohol or drugs: exciting, inspiring, relaxing, toxic, endlessly quivering, resistant and reluctant, defiant and rebellious – a spirit that in international media today still is a point of reference to Berlin techno, and can be seen as an aesthetically co-created, continuing bond between past and presence in this space. Wolfgang Tillman’s sexualised body photography in the Panorama bar, for instance, can be read as a reference to the above-mentioned ‘Berliner Luft’, as well as Piotr Nathan’s 25 meter Panorama “rituals of disappearance” in the basement foyer that shows the power of natural forces and the ritual feast. While Berghain owners and managers do not give any media interviews and statements – and have imposed a strong non-photo policy in the club that adds to the overall myth – they have still edited a new book on art in the club that emphasises its impact on the special club experience.

Scholars in museum studies like Tony Bennett acknowledge that art, architecture and artefacts influence the behaviour, beliefs and (national) identity construction of the visiting public, and affect the discourse about what is worth recognising or thinking about. Newer studies highlight the particular value of aesthetic, co-created experiences for an embodied understanding. Rather than presenting historic objects whose story is told with words and text, museums aim to affect people's understanding through an increasing appeal to sensory responses, emotions and feelings to create experiences that are phenomenologically real. People actively alter and negotiate these unstable experiences in space and time for achieving an embodied understanding of things past and their meaning today. People present in these spaces too are creators of "aesthetic work" that produces what is worth recognising. To understand how they complement and alter aesthetic efforts of those who organise these spaces, and influence this discourse through aesthetic work, movement-related elements, sound and other co-created aspects of the interaction shall be discussed in the next section.

Experiencing the sound of 'Berlin' techno

Sound and music are of particular importance for Berghain. The club is filled with a certain kind of techno, a "signature sound," that can be revisited in the music produced by Berghain's Ostgut label. Ostgut also assesses the signature sound associated with its artists as having an "industrial punch, heavy groove and fierce determination." DJ's knowledge of music is informed by historical styles of music in the GDR and the West, as for example explained by Berghain resident DJ Norman Nodge in an article on a music website, and some of these historic tracks are played and much appreciated by today's ravers, who give ex-post feedback online. In this respect DJs influence the scene's collective sensibility in a context that originates in, relates back to and helps keep alive the spirit of Berlin perpetuated in popular discourse.

The sound that echoes in the space and is part of the discourse on vinyls, mp3s and streams on Soundcloud signifies the club's pedigree: Berlin's Techno is in many contemporary writings likened to a sonic representation of the city. The industrial, "empty" sound has been linked to the deserted party spaces in Berlin's former death strip: "It was like the wall crushed and the sounds crushed." Berghain has a sonic identity that is said to act "as a sonic reminder of the capital's tumultuous past ... signifying its past and present in equal measure". It is described as an aggressive, brutal, minimalist, raw form of techno, a style that a DJ we interviewed, in a more masculine tone, confirmed as "Auf die Fresse" ("in your face"). Another DJ emphasised that the music "echoes" the industrial connotations of the former electricity power station's architecture, and museum studies have acknowledged that a sonic experience influences visitors' embodied understanding of socio-cultural and historical contexts.

Co-creating the embodied discourse

Continuing the discourse of techno as a kind of post-Cold War folk music in contrast to virtuosic ideas of classical musicians, DJs are not staged like famous mainstream DJ stars on high podiums, but work close to the public. Berghain DJs interviewed reject exaggerated DJ performances: "I find it ridiculous to throw up my arms when the bass kicks back in and to entertain the audience, this behaviour just does not fit to the place." They did see themselves as 'responsible' for the party, being a friend of the crowd, continuing an unpretentious tradition that is linked to Berlin. This general laid back attitude recently was praised by Claire Danes, the star from the TV-series *Homeland*, who in her appearance at The Ellen DeGeneres Show in 2015 told astonished US audiences about ravers dancing naked and eating ice-cream on a

Sunday afternoon. Berghain doors open Saturday night and parties go for up to 36 hours, providing plenty of time for an unusual aesthetic experience.

The enabling of the party is not achieved by the artful selection of music by the DJs but by their ability to use the music and the technology they use, the record players, volume dials, mixers and others, to interact with the crowd. Thus, the music selection and playing is socially attained in the space of the Berghain and as a process of “melting together the mass,” creating and “concentrating energies,” as it was once expressed by one of the founders of the techno scene, the French DJ Laurent Garnier. DJs are mixing not just music but “music with people” as the DJ Westbam says. A DJ set is seen as a “narrative” or a “journey,” with the DJ enabling an experience related to a certain pedigree that is evoked and performed and fed back into the discourse.

The interaction of the DJs and crowd by virtue of the music is instantiated in the bodies’ movement that connects to the discourse via forms of embodied understanding. The four-to-the-floor beat and the characteristic use of snare and hi-hats in techno informs people’s movement – different from other music that makes dancers bump ‘n’ grind for example. A raver’s erect upper body and open arm movements have been interpreted, more semiotically, as dialogical and as a communicative openness contributing to a communal experience. In the interviews, DJs also emphasised that communal aspect as they do ‘read’ the dancing crowd visually, but perceive the energy from the dance floor in kinaesthetic ways: “I don’t observe individuals dancing, but I feel the moving crowd as if I were down there and I react to what I feel.”

There is a de-emphasis on feet, stomping or otherwise, in the sonic organization of Berghain, where speakers are hung as architectural elements from the ceilings. While being part of the crowd, dancing is an individual act, and it can be observed that architecture and music inform this identity performance. This can be seen as a typical occasion in which knowledge of the past is re-embodied and actualized through dance. Dancing as a mimetic practice not only mimes and expresses, but also performs, keeps alive and constructs anew a specific Berlin narration through the medium of the body and its movement.

Although dancing is accomplished as an individual act other people mostly are not an audience to the action but are involved in the same activity. The simultaneous dancing of a plentiful of people turns the individual act of dancing into a social activity produced within a unique Berlin-specific architectural and auditory environment. For all those at Berghain, the dancing creates “Berliner Luft,” an exciting, inspiring, relaxing, toxic, endlessly quivering, resistant and reluctant, defiant and rebellious atmosphere that with every beat for 25 years now has torn down the wall in people’s heads and still recreates this enthusiast spirit. Dance in other cultural contexts uses the body as store of memory that affects the mind, and techno music is an aesthetic means of power that makes dancers recreating a kinaesthetic and embodied reproduction of elements that have been linked to a discourse of Berlin.

Discussion and conclusion

We have developed the argument that the public discourse is controlled, negotiated and challenged in a co-created process of ‘aesthetic work.’ The Berghain techno club through aesthetic action maintains ties between the past and present, recreating the Berlin spirit in many ways. The vibe or atmosphere that is produced and corporally coordinated with participants is a collective practice, historically and spatially enacted, that in situ works through a variety of elements. The title of the paper “four-to-the-floor” refers to the beat, the movement and the atmosphere created by the dancing crowd in conjunction with the DJ and the space, with people making sense of the experience through not so much their cognitive, but their sensual capabilities. In the sense of Esme Nicholson’s suggestions that, “You have to experience it there

to understand it, and then you can take it home with you,” participants take home an atmospheric, affective power of feeling that is then reproduced in conversations, on blogs and in newspapers and magazines.

25 years after the fall of the wall, we find an increasing number of books that relate techno music to German identity and history, with the embodied rave allegedly anticipating a mental reunification of Germany. These publications form part of the discourse in the sense of Judith Butler, when history is influenced by efforts to control what people see. While our interviews did not specifically address this, our perspective suggests the relevance of forms of memory that do not take place in text and word, but are actualized on the aesthetic level when people come together. In this sense it may for example be a concern that the vibe of the place is changing with an international audience. Unlike the logic of discourse, which functions by making the thoughts explicit in a linear series of signs, the atmosphere as a product of aesthetic work is not fully visible, but re-embodied and also to be renegotiated constantly.

The mimetic practice of dance is an appropriation and a bodily reproduction and a new construction of reality that is non-discursive and that also offers the potential of resistance towards past and presence. Aesthetic practices that precede and parallel elements of the discourse transmitted via text and words provide an interesting area for a re-negotiation of public understanding. The historical discourse of Berlin only 25 years later emphasises the strong potential of embodied interaction.

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